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THE NAG HAMMADI CODICES

A general introduction to the
nature and significance of the
Coptic Gnostic Codices from
Nag Hammadi

by
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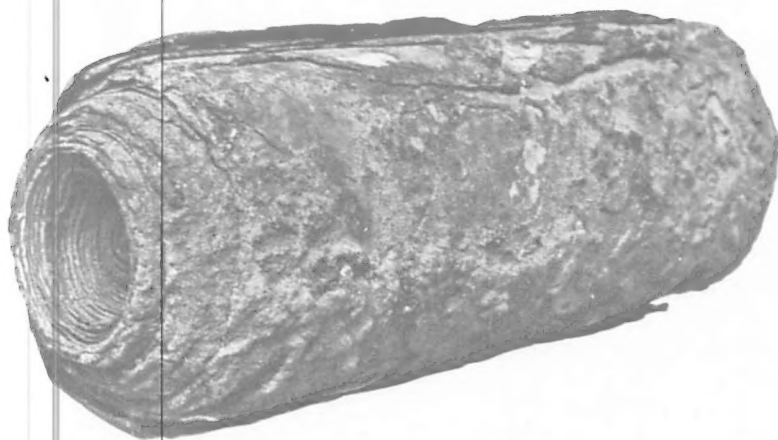
Photos: p.1 Palestine Archeological Museum, pp.2,3,4 J. Doresse, p.6 UNESCO, p.9 J. Doresse, p.11 British
Museum, p.14 J. Doresse, J. Robinson

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FROM THE DEAD SEA SCROLLS



The Dead Sea Scrolls have become much more familiar to the American public than the Nag Hammadi Codices. Yet these two remarkable manuscript discoveries are similar enough in nature and importance that the one that is well known can put the other into profile and perspective.

Both manuscript collections are libraries of off-beat monastic groups, one living in caves along the Wadi Qumran near the Dead Sea in Palestine, the other probably living in caves cut into the face of the Gebel et-Tarif near the Nile in Upper Egypt. One group hid its library in jars in the caves as the Roman Tenth Legion attacked their monastery in 68 A.D. in the war leading to the fall of Jerusalem; the other hid its library in a jar in the Greco-Roman cemetery at the foot of the cliff, perhaps after Bishop Athanasius' Paschal letter of 367 A.D. called for the expulsion of heretics and their books from all Christian monasteries.

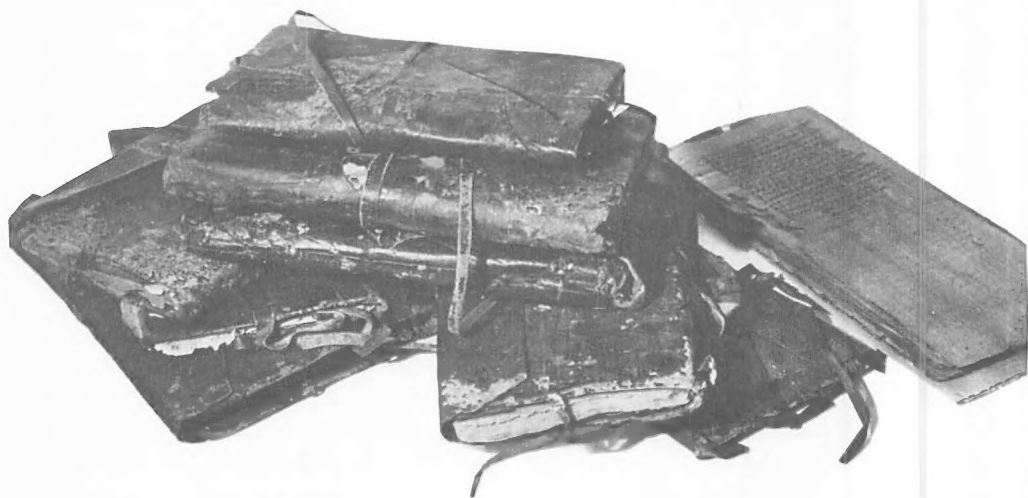
One library was written in Hebrew; the other was originally composed in Greek, but had been translated into the Egyptian language of the day, Coptic. One was written from the Second Century B.C. to the First Century A.D.; the other from the First to the Fourth Century A.D. One was written on parchment scrolls; the other was written in papyrus codices, that is to say, scrolls cut into leaves and bound in leather covers as books are today.

One library was found by a peasant boy hunting for a lost goat in a cave around 1947; the other by peasants digging for fertilizer in a cemetery around 1946. One is now conserved in the Shrine of the Book in Jerusalem, Israel; the other in the Coptic Museum in Cairo, Egypt. Most of one was published and avidly studied in the '50s and '60s; parts of the other have become available only in a trickle—but the flood gates have just opened, and a wave of new material is sweeping over the well-worn ruts of scholarship in the '70s to lay out new maps of early Judaism and Christianity and to accelerate dramatically the process already begun by the Dead Sea Scrolls.

One library contains the texts of a heretical Jewish movement expelled from the Jerusalem temple, part of a group called the Essenes; the other contains the texts of a heretical Christian movement expelled from the monasteries founded by Saint Pachomius, part of a group called the Gnostics. The Essenes cherished the Hebrew Scriptures, but interpreted them in terms of dualism; the Gnostics cherished both Old and New Testaments, but interpreted them in terms of a mythological gnostic redeemer.

Gnosticism was the religion that expressed most clearly the mood of defeatism and despair that swept the ancient world in the early centuries of the Christian era. But already the Essenes had provided a foretaste of this mood in the Dead Sea Scrolls, by repudiating this world and longing for its end. The Israelites had originally had a religion affirming the goodness of the world, but the Jewish apocalypticism of the Dead Sea Scrolls shows how a people that had again and again lost its freedom to one world power after another gave up any realistic hope of making a go of it in this world. The Essenes did keep at least one foot on the ground by dreaming of a visionary victory over the Romans and a magic transformation of the world into a garden of Eden. But other strands of the ancient world, likewise the prey of arbitrary whims of fate, could experience an unmitigated nihilistic despair. It was this mood emerging all across the ancient world that came to mythological expression in Gnosticism.

Qumran led in part to Nag Hammadi: Essene dualism condemned this world with its children of darkness and heralded an apocalyptic deliverance for the sons of light; Gnostic mythology portrayed this world as an evil god's prison for the sparks of the divine, and imparted the knowledge with which they could escape to their lost origin above. This trajectory of other-worldly escapism was nipped in the bud by the anathemas of the orthodox rabbis of Jamnia around 100 A.D., but it had to be rooted out of Christianity when in full bloom two or three centuries later. Although it survived as an organized sect only in Mesopotamia, it has continued a suppressed underground existence throughout Western civilization down to Albert Camus' *The Stranger*, Colin Wilson's *The Outsider*, and the dropouts of our own day. Gnosticism is the Zen of the Western world.



TO THE NAG HAMMADI CODICES

The Discovery of the Nag Hammadi Library

Nag Hammadi is the modern Arabic name of a large town where the railroad crosses the Nile about three-fourths of the way upstream from Cairo to Luxor. Here the Nile makes a small U-shaped bend which forms a kind of oasis by producing more arable land than the usual narrow strip along the river bank. Early in the Fourth Century A.D. Christian monks lived in solitude in the desert at the edge of this oasis and in caves in the cliff of the Gebel et-Tarif, the abrupt mountain range that crosses the top of the U-shaped bend in the Nile. One monk, Saint Pachomius, brought together a number of these solitary monks into the first Christian monastic community. A number of such monasteries sprung up in that oasis around the middle of the Fourth Century.



The Nag Hammadi Codices were first studied by Jean Doresse (third from left) pictured here at the base of the cliffs along the Nile with peasants from the vicinity in which the codices had been buried for centuries.

The monks at the Pachomian monasteries supported their frugal existence through farming and manual crafts. Apparently they used the skins of some of their animals to make the leather covers of books. Old discarded letters, receipts, etc., related to their agricultural business, were pasted together into cardboard to line the leather covers and make them hardback books. Dates on this re-used papyrus from the years just prior to 350 A.D. indicate that the books were manufactured soon thereafter. This was soon after the invention of the codex, a book made in the modern way of pages bound in a cover in distinction from the rolled scroll. In fact the leather bindings from Nag Hammadi are the oldest that have survived anywhere.

No doubt the monks used the books they manufactured to copy their holy texts, much as the Essenes copied their sacred writings in their scriptorium at Qumran. But the library that has been discovered near Nag Hammadi is a heretical collection, representing the Gnostic version of Christianity as well as Gnostic twists on Judaism and on other Hellenistic religions. One usually assumes that the monks who copied such texts were Gnostic Christians who had not yet been forced out of the monasteries. One can imagine that the Gnostic monks were expelled with their books as the monasteries came under orthodox censorship. The Gnostics might well have repudiated this worldly intervention from the distant capital of Greek culture, Alexandria. They might have felt they could best preserve the spiritualism of their otherworldly view by returning to the solitary caves in the cliff overlooking the desert, from which their predecessors had been enticed to enter the monasteries in the midst of the lush arable oasis. In any case they buried their holy books in a jar in the Greco-Roman cemetery at the foot of the cliff.

From time to time peasants in the nearby Arab village of Hamra Dom dig in this cemetery for *sebach*, a nitrate that forms in ruins and functions as fertilizer for the poor soil at the edge of the desert. One report is to the effect that the person who actually found the jar was a lad who had avenged the murder of his father by killing the murderer and had then fled to the desert to avoid arrest. Once the jar was found, the peasants divided the codices among themselves; each then sold his part to middlemen for whatever price he could negotiate.

In March of 1946 two French scholars in Cairo were shown two of the codices that had been left on consignment in the antiquities shop of Mansoor near the old Shepherds Hotel by such middlemen. Later in 1946 the Coptic Museum bought another codex of the same library from a Raghheb Andrawes accompanied by a Coptic priest, Abd el-Said. Within the next year or so a total of twelve codices reached Cairo.



The Coptic priest, David, who saw the Nag Hammadi Codices shortly after their discovery.

Ten were collected from various middlemen by an antiquities dealer in Cairo, Phocion J. Tano, from whom they were ultimately confiscated, nationalized and deposited in the Coptic Museum. One was bought from a cereal merchant of Nag Hammadi by a Cairo antiquities dealer, Albert Eid, who took it out of Egypt and offered it for sale in the U.S.A. It was finally acquired from his widow for the Jung Institute of Zürich, Switzerland, through the benevolence of George H. Page. One has disappeared, except for some 16 pages ripped out as a minor share of the loot and ultimately added to the large collection that came to the Coptic Museum (which also obtained a few pages from the Jung Codex). Inside the front cover of another, sixteen pages removed in antiquity from a thirteenth codex were found.

The Contents of the Nag Hammadi Library

The Nag Hammadi library is actually much more comprehensive than twelve codices plus one loose tractate might suggest. For each codex is in fact a collection of essays.

The Nag Hammadi library contains a total of fifty-three such tractates. Of course the relevant fact is the number of previously unknown documents included in that total. First one can subtract six duplicates within the library itself, leaving forty-seven different tractates. But six of these are texts of which a complete copy existed elsewhere, so that there are only forty-one tractates that exist only in the Nag Hammadi copy. Fragments of two further tractates exist elsewhere, but these fragments were too small to make an identification of their contents possible until the Nag Hammadi discovery provided the full text. Of course some of the Nag Hammadi tractates are themselves sufficiently fragmentary that the train of thought is often broken and an adequate understanding of the documents hindered. About ten tractates are in bad condition, whereas about thirty-one tractates are in relatively good condition and are for all practical purposes rescued for posterity. As manuscripts go, this is a remarkably rich harvest of previously unknown texts. One may compare the Dead Sea Scrolls, where small fragments of many more scrolls survive, but the number of previously unknown texts that survive intact can almost be counted on one hand. And one may compare the New Testament, which consists of twenty-seven tractates.

In terms of pages of text, the size of the Nag Hammadi library is also impressive. There were originally about 1257 pages with writing on them, of which about 1153 survive. This means that about 90% of the pages in whole or part have survived. Half of the missing pages are from the one codex that is almost entirely lost, but these belong to tractates of which another copy survives intact. Hence the actual loss of text is considerably less. To be sure some of the surviving pages—perhaps about a third—survive in varying degrees of fragmentation. Yet even here there is some encouragement. Old photographs made as early as 1949 contain some bits of text that have subsequently broken off and become lost, but that are preserved in the form of these photographs. And when one considers the amount of text that can be filled in with considerable reliability by the painstaking efforts of various scholars who have devoted years to their study, the actual loss is even less. In view of the risks, delays and crises the Nag Hammadi Codices have undergone since their discovery, this is a remarkable record of preservation.

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ΠΕΤΕ ΠΩΚΝΨΗΡΕ ΑΥΩΝ

A page from Nag Hammadi Codex VII, dated by means of papyri found in the cover around the middle of the fourth century A.D.

The Gnostic Religion

Scholars used to think of Gnosticism simply as a Christian heresy of the Second and Third Centuries. This was due to an optical illusion. The Church had succeeded so well in suppressing all the Gnostic literature that the only material that survived for the scholar to use was an occasional quote by some early Christian heresy-hunter. Such Church Fathers usually did not direct their detailed polemics against non-Christians, who were in any case beyond the pale, but focussed their attention on defending the faith against heresy rampant within the Church. Hence they usually quoted Christian Gnostics, with the result that the scholar had documentation primarily for this one limited segment of Gnosticism.

The Nag Hammadi Codices change this situation overnight. Many of the tractates in this library are Christian, such as the *Gospel of Thomas* containing about 114 sayings attributed to Jesus. But some of the Christian texts turn out to be only edited versions of non-Christian texts. In one case both versions survive in the library: The tractate entitled *Eugnostos* is a non-Christian gnostic speculation. Right next to it is a tractate entitled *The Wisdom of Jesus Christ*, containing a dialogue between the resurrected Christ and his disciples. Upon reexamination it becomes clear that some Christian gnostic writer took the tractate *Eugnostos*, cut it up into paragraphs, and built them into a fictitious dialogue of Jesus' answers to his disciples' questions. He then christened his Christianized version of *Eugnostos* as *The Wisdom of Jesus Christ*. In other cases the non-Christian original has not been preserved, but the editing was sufficiently clumsy that one can detect the same Christianizing process at work.

In still other tractates one simply has a non-Christian text. *The Apocalypse of Adam* and the *Paraphrase of Shem* are mythological interpretations of the book of Genesis. They insert into the story a gnostic redeemer who cannot be explained as borrowed from Christianity. More nearly the reverse is true: These texts demonstrate the mythological wealth that off-beat Judaism made available to nascent Christianity for expressing the grandeur of Jesus.

In a very real sense, "Jewish Gnosticism" is a contradiction in terms. For it is typical of much Gnosticism that Yahweh, the true God as he revealed himself to Israel, is perverted into Yaldabaoth, the false creator god who was ignorant of the true God above. One may well feel that if a Jewish thinker were to embrace such thoughts, he would by definition cease to be a Jew. Of course the same might equally well be said of Christian Gnostics. Yet someone intimately familiar with Jewish traditions, and in some cases without apparent Christian traditions, did use such Jewish traditions as a basis for Gnostic speculations. There were many traditions in Judaism about Adam; a whole body of "Adam literature" has survived. And a form of literature current in Judaism was the "testament," i.e. the (often fictitious) last will and testament of a venerated figure from the Bible. The Nag Hammadi tractate entitled *The Apocalypse of Adam* builds on such Jewish traditions to present the Gnostic message as Adam on his deathbed prophesies the Genesis story to his son Seth. Other Nag Hammadi tractates, such as *Zostrianos* and *The Three Steles of Seth*, presuppose "Sethian" traditions without apparent Christian influence. Indeed one may wonder whether the gnostic group called "Sethians" may not have been composed originally of heretical Jews, Samaritans, or other sectarians who, like the Essenes, were embittered with main-line Judaism.

Another gnostic group was called "Ophites," venerated the serpent, and such traditions are presupposed in a midrash imbedded in one Nag Hammadi tractate, as well as in such Christianized tractates as *The Nature of the Rulers* and *On the Origin of the World*. Jewish Melchizedek traditions are documented both in the Dead Sea Scrolls and in a Nag Hammadi tractate entitled *Melchizedek*. However one may wish to designate the persons who twisted such Jewish traditions into Gnostic mythology, clearly there seems to be evidence in the Nag Hammadi library that Gnostics other than Christian Gnostics had their roots in Jewish traditions. The Nag Hammadi Codices open up the pre-history of Gershom Scholem's book *Jewish Gnosticism, Merkabah Mysticism, and Talmudic Tradition*.

Other tractates represent the Hermetic religion, a form of Gnosticism built around the Egyptian deity Hermes Trismegistos. Still other non-Christian tractates present a philosophized religion, the kind of Gnosticism combatted by the Neoplatonic philosopher Plotinus. One bears the very modern title *Allogenes*: the "Stranger" or "Outsider." This philosophical theology can appeal freely to any religious heritage: *The Three Steles of Seth* pose as prayers written by Adam's son Seth; another tractate poses as a speculation written by Zoroaster's kinsman Zostrianos—a cryptogram appended to the title even mentions Zoroaster himself. A further kind of non-Christian text is the moralistic philosophy of the *Sentences of Sextus*, a kind of Hellenistic *Poor Richard's Almanac*. This document is not expressly Gnostic, but was no doubt given a Gnostic interpretation by the Gnostic community. The same must be the case with a couple of pages from Plato's *Republic* in a very garbled Coptic translation.

Now that the Nag Hammadi Codices provide us with a real cross-section of Gnostic literature, Gnosticism turns out to be a religion in its own right. It emerged within the various religious traditions of antiquity, infused them with its otherworldly mood, and fused them into a new and radically spiritualistic religion, the major competitor to Christianity during the decline and fall of the Roman Empire.

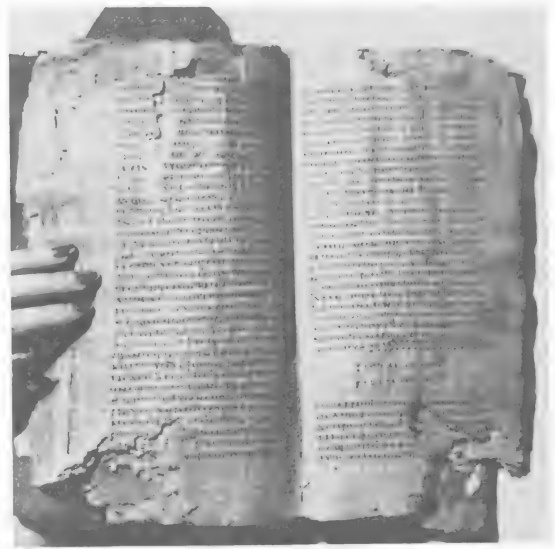
The Gnostic Reinterpretation of Genesis

The Book of Genesis, like Homer's epic poems, made a tremendous impression on the ancient world. After all, it recorded the very beginnings, the antediluvian revelation of God. The Gnostic way of trying to understand the situation in which man existed in this world was to speculate on how the whole horrid mess came about. Their preferred textbook was obviously Genesis. We have long ago become accustomed to the traditional Christian and Jewish interpretations of the Hebrew Scriptures. The commentaries among the Dead Sea Scrolls have shown a third variant, interpreting Old Testament prophets as predicting the recent history of the Essenes. But here in the Nag Hammadi Codices we find biblical interpretation with a vengeance!

Since this world is hell, its creator must be the devil. The God of the Hebrew Scriptures, who revealed his name to Moses as Yahweh, became for the Gnostics the evil fabricator of this mess, Yaldabaoth. It is out of pure ignorance and vain conceit that he proclaims "I am God and there is no other beside me!" The Gnostics are by definition—since Gnostic means "knower"—those who know all

about the hidden good God on high. It is he who sent the Gnostic redeemer with this saving knowledge. But Yaldabaoth is not the highest God; his mother Sophia made a catastrophic miscalculation in conceiving him without her mate—an abortive effort on her part to imitate the first creative act of the highest God, a presumption punished by the blinding of her son. This blinded ignorant god is so jealous of the humans he has fabricated that he forbids them to eat from the trees of the garden the food that leads to knowledge and immortality. He is so stupid he cannot even find Adam in the garden, and has to call out and ask “Where are you?” The Spirit imbedded in man moves with Adam’s rib to Eve; the lackeys of the evil creator rape her and produce the murderer Cain. But the Spirit had escaped in the nick of time from her into the serpent, who blurts out the truth to Adam and Eve about the trees in the garden. A never-ending struggle between the Gnostics and the ignorant creator ensues. He tries to wipe out the Gnostics with the flood, sparing only the servile Noah. When the Gnostics find shelter at Sodom and Gomorrah, he seeks to destroy them with fire and brimstone. What the Gnostics did was simply to turn Genesis upside down!

Codex II open to the last two pages of the Gospel of Thomas, where the title appears.



The Gnostic Life of Christ

There is no biography of Christ in the Nag Hammadi Codices. However four tractates are entitled gospels: *The Gospel of Thomas*, the *Gospel of Philip*, the *Gospel of Truth*, and the *Gospel of the Egyptians*. But of them only the *Gospel of Thomas* has much to do with Jesus: It contains about 114 sayings attributed to him. Some are purely Gnostic fabrications, some are familiar from the Gospels in the New Testament, some are previously unknown sayings that may in fact have been spoken by Jesus. But the *Gospel of Thomas* does not contain a biographical framework.

Nevertheless the Gnostic community that used this library would have been able to piece together allusions from different tractates into a sort of life of Christ. Of course such a mosaic would not have been the concept of any one

author, and certainly would have little to do with the historical Jesus; it would only be the secondary construct of users of the library. The orthodox Christian also has a secondary construct when he thinks of the life of Christ. The New Testament contains four Gospels, each presenting a somewhat different picture of Jesus. Yet all have so blended in the church's memory that hardly anyone has the presentation of any one Gospel clearly in view. The church's mosaic has replaced both the individual Gospel and the historical Jesus in the average Christian's experience.

What picture of Jesus would the average member of the Nag Hammadi community have had?

Jesus was born a twin. His twin brother was named Judas Didymus Thomas (both Didymus and Thomas mean "twin").

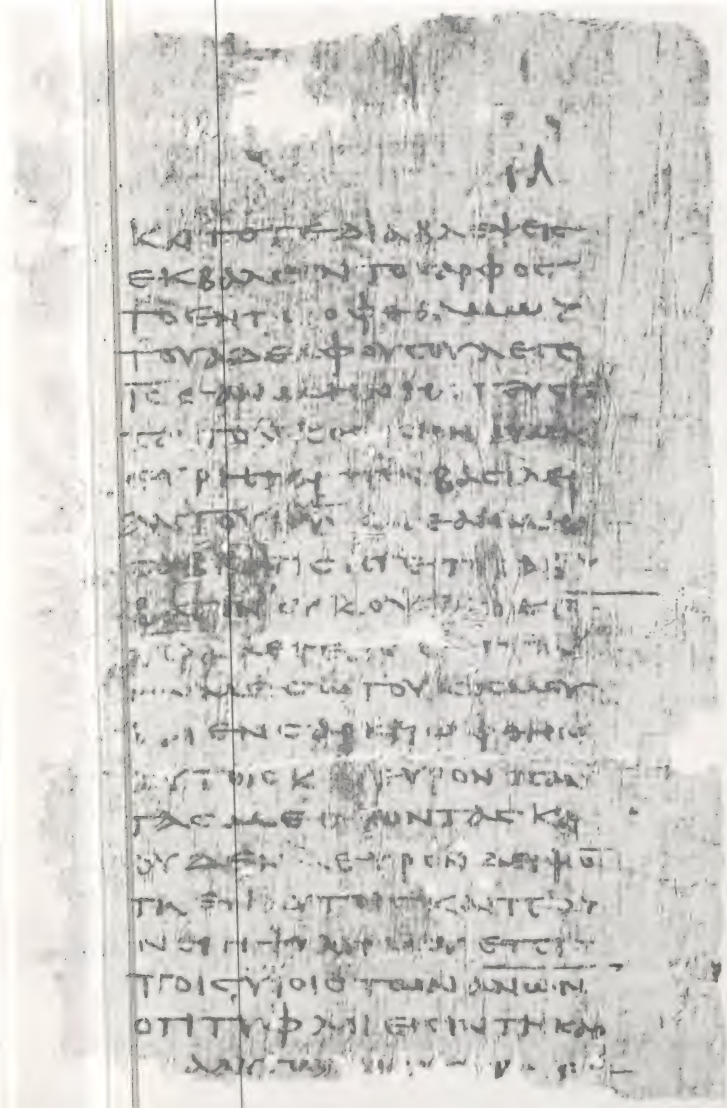
Jesus had disciples familiar from the New Testament gospels. But just as the canonical Gospel nearest to Gnosticism, the Gospel of John, seems to favor Thomas and the beloved disciple at the expense of Peter, who had predominated in the main-line Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, so too the Nag Hammadi Codices suggest a ranking different from the orthodox order of priority. For example, the familiar scene at Caesarea Philippi where Peter's confession earns him the title "Rock," becomes in the *Gospel of Thomas* a scene where Peter and Matthew give less than ideal responses; it is Thomas who provides the loftiest confession and receives Jesus' recognition of his preeminence. There are occasional allusions to the twelve apostles, but they are not listed; and others not in the orthodox list of twelve are especially prominent. Jesus' brothers James and Jude predominate, with three tractates ascribed to the one and two to the other. Women are sometimes prominent, though Jesus tells Mary she must become male to enter the kingdom of heaven.

What Jesus did during his lifetime, that is to say, while he was in a body, is for the Gnostics hardly worth recording. Presumably this is because a person in a body is weighted down with sleep, fatigue, drunkenness. He escapes into knowledge only in ecstasy, which is the ascent of his soul out of his body, and when he is liberated from the body by death. This is the way the Gnostics understood their own situation, and they seem to have understood Jesus in much the same way. Therefore their primary interest was in the resurrected Christ, with only occasional allusions to the earthly Jesus. They only wanted to maintain that the disembodied heavenly Christ whom they worship is the true and exalted form of the more mundane Jesus of orthodox Christianity. In this way they hoped to discredit orthodox Christianity for retaining its "worldly" picture of Jesus. What the orthodox think of Jesus is an understanding on a lower, bodily level, whereas the Gnostics thought they knew him on the higher, spiritual plane.

The *Apocryphon of James* reports that Jesus taught in riddles so unintelligible that he had to tarry after the resurrection to provide the Gnostics with the true esoteric interpretation. During his lifetime Jesus had only given coded messages really intended for the Gnostics, to whom the resurrected Christ spelled it all out in great detail and clarity. The teachings of Jesus in the *Gospel of Thomas* do not save unless one finds the secret meaning—that is to say, unless one reads them with gnostic spectacles. Actually the Gnostic felt that he could get along quite well with only the revelations of the resurrected Christ. For this reason the bulk of the stories of Jesus have to do with the resurrected Christ. According to the

Apocryphon of James Christ takes James and Peter apart after the resurrection and teaches them perfection so that they, like he, may ascend into heaven. According to a tractate entitled the *Letter of Peter to Philip*, after the resurrection Christ instructs the apostles to meet him on the Mount of Olives, where he teaches them Gnostic mythology.

According to the Gnostics, Jesus did not die on the cross. Simon of Cyrene, who in the orthodox Gospels was enlisted to carry Jesus' cross, was crucified in his place. This was a ruse performed by Christ on his persecutors, the ignorant underlings of the evil creator. The spiritual Christ looked on from heaven and made fun of them during the whole proceeding.



Oxyrhynchus Papyrus 1, a page from a 2nd or 3rd century Greek codex containing sayings of Jesus closely parallel to sayings 26-33 of the Coptic Gospel of Thomas from Nag Hammadi.

The Gnostic Environment of the New Testament

It used to be thought that the New Testament was written in a vacuum. The way it presented Jesus' life and the Church's beginnings was simply taken to be the way these events took place: Paul's Epistles were excerpts from his abstract theological system. But the four Gospels tell Jesus' life quite differently and Paul in each letter slants his presentation very pointedly. From this one may infer that if any of the Gospels had been written by a different person, or in a different decade, or in a different congregation or province, it would have been quite different from what that Gospel actually is; if one of Paul's Epistles had been written at a different time from a different place or to a different Church, it would have been quite different from what that Epistle actually is. The precise situation in which each was written is a major cause for the way it was written, the approach it takes and the position it assumes. Hence scholars have by and large stopped trying to understand the New Testament simply by harmonizing narratives from different Gospels into a unified biography of Christ and harmonizing doctrines from different Epistles into a unified Christian theology. Current research is directed toward historical data that fills in the context of each text, shows its contours, and puts it in profile. Only by sketching the situation to which the Gospel or Epistle spoke, can one discern what it had to say.

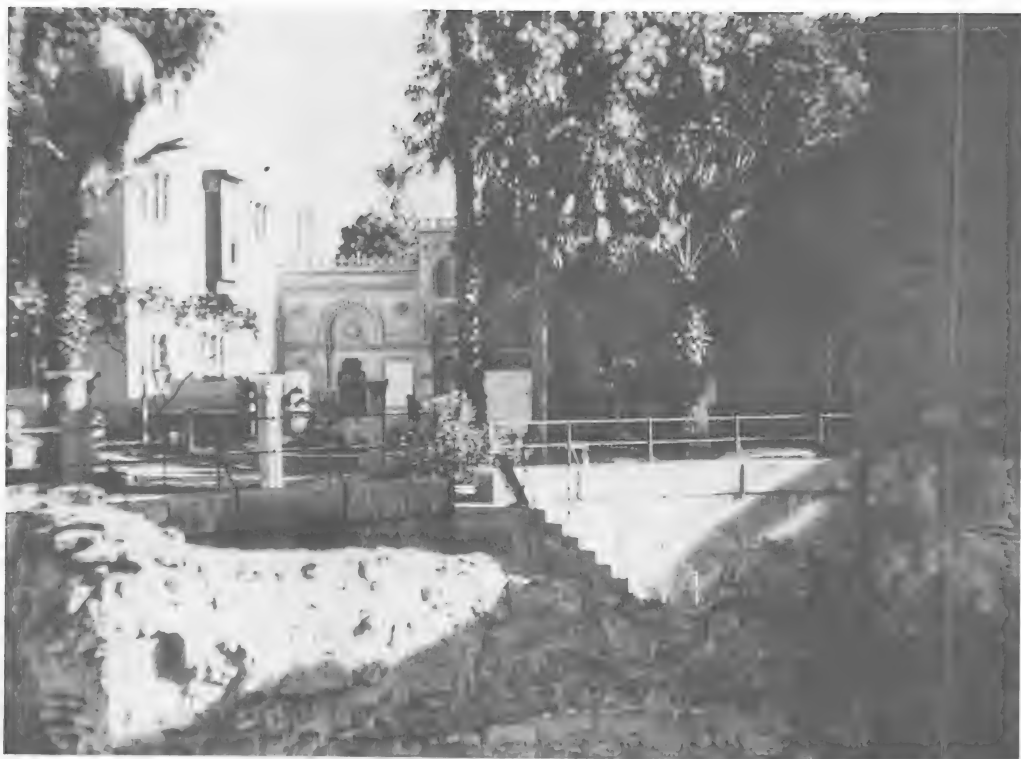
In several important instances this context had been sensed to be nascent Gnosticism. But as long as Gnosticism remained a hazy concept, the New Testament would at such points inevitably remain obscure. The Nag Hammadi Codices have brought such parts of the New Testament into clear daylight. They make clear the gnosticizing milieu from which New Testament writers such as the author of the Gospel of John or of the Epistle of Colossians drew their thought patterns; or they clarify the front a New Testament writer such as Paul was criticizing, a front that shaped the profile of some New Testament documents.

Paul wrote his first letter to Corinth to squelch a movement in that church that seemed to him potentially dangerous. To understand just what Paul's letter means, one would have to understand what the view was that he was opposing. From allusions he makes in that letter scholars have reconstructed his opponents. They seem to have been very otherworldly, to have ignored their bodies, to have reveled in having achieved the completion of salvation already, and to have denied the resurrection. One has surmised this position might be similar to a heresy condemned in a later New Testament book, according to which Hymenaeus and Philetus mislead the faithful by declaring our resurrection has taken place already. Such a purely spiritual resurrection would tend to make the day of judgment and the final resurrection superfluous. Actually, the Epistle of Colossians in the New Testament seems to be under the influence of such an idea when it proclaims that our life is hidden with Christ in God in heaven, so that the future will merely reveal what has already happened spiritually. But only in the Nag Hammadi Codices do we have a tractate *On Resurrection* that presents the view dimly sensed behind parts of the New Testament itself.

The Nag Hammadi Codices present the resurrected Christ as a disembodied, shining light. But the New Testament Gospels present the resurrected Christ as having a body that appears to be like a human body—he is taken for a gardener, or for a traveler to Emmaus; he eats; his wounds can be touched. But the New

Testament itself suggests that the earliest narratives of the resurrection may have pictured the resurrected Christ as a bright light much as the Gnostics did. The first appearance was admittedly to Peter, but the story of that appearance is not narrated; one looks in vain for it where one finds the other resurrection appearances narrated at the end of the Gospels. It has been conjectured that it ultimately came to seem too ghostly, too much like the resurrection appearances claimed by emerging Gnosticism; hence it was either suppressed or put back into the lifetime of Jesus where it would not count as a resurrection appearance and also would seem less ghostly: the transfiguration story. Paul insists again and again that, although he was not a disciple during Jesus' lifetime, he did witness a genuine appearance of the resurrected Christ. But his picture of a resurrection "body" is a bright light, a heavenly "body" like a sun, star or planet, not like a human body. So the book of Acts, while recounting in detail Paul's "conversion" after he encountered Jesus as a blinding light, places it well outside of the period of resurrection appearances, which the author limits to forty days. The New Testament Apocalypse of John begins with a resurrection appearance cast in such lurid, mythological language that it is often overlooked; in it Jesus clearly appeared as flaming fire. The orthodox church shifted attention away from such luminous appearances of Jesus in favor of the more down-to-earth portrayals in human appearance. But the Gnostics continued this luminous tradition and exploited it for their spiritualized otherworldly theology. By recounting such luminous Gnostic resurrection appearances, the Nag Hammadi Codices have shown us what was going on in the background of the New Testament itself.

The Gospel of John, because it presents Jesus in such a different way from the other ("synoptic") Gospels, has often been called the spiritual Gospel. Scholars once thought it reflected Greek influence. Then in the 1920's its more oriental style lead them to shift it into the Syrian world. The nearest parallels that could then be found were in the Mandaean literature—the medieval remains of an eastern Gnostic sect in Iraq! It was only a conjecture that if one could find earlier Gnostic texts from the Jordan region they too would document the environment of the Gospel of John. Then when the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered, they proved to go a long way toward filling in the context of the Gospel of John: the same dualism between light and darkness, truth and lie, life and death! But what had been present in the late Mandaean texts but was absent from the Dead Sea Scrolls was the redeemer figure, who came down from heaven and after his revelation returned to heaven. This pattern dominates the Gospel of John. For orthodox Christians of today that may seem quite as it should be: The Dead Sea Scrolls provide the historical context, and the addition of the redeemer descending from heaven and reascending to heaven is simply due to the fact that Jesus did in fact descend from heaven and reascend to heaven. But the more critical thinker would pose the question in a different way: Why did the Gospel of John, in emphasizing the importance of Jesus, make use of religious symbolism found only in the later Mandaean texts? Even though this symbolism was not found in the Dead Sea Scrolls, must it not have been alive somewhere in that environment? The Nag Hammadi Codices have produced the missing documentation: The *Apocalypse of Adam*, a non-Christian Jewish Gnostic interpretation of Genesis, presents the redeemer as coming to earth, suffering, and triumphing. It seems to have been composed in the Syrian-Jordan region during the First



The entrance to the Coptic Museum in Old Cairo, which is the official repository for the Nag Hammadi Codices. The museum is built upon the ruins (visible in the foreground) of a Roman fortress known in early Christian times as Babylon.



Members of the International Committee for the Nag Hammadi Codices.



Mr. Victor Girgis, Director of the Coptic Museum.

Century A.D.—much the same time and place as the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Gospel of John! This is a good instance of the way in which the Nag Hammadi Codices fulfill some of the expectations that were originally held for the Dead Sea Scrolls. The combination of the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Nag Hammadi Codices put the New Testament into context so that the sharp contours of its profile emerge.

The Publication of the Nag Hammadi Codices

The publication of most of the Nag Hammadi Codices was delayed a quarter of a century by monopolistic tendencies and national rivalries as well as by the vicissitudes of Near Eastern politics: the fall of King Farouk and the rise of Nasser, the Suez crisis, and the Six Day War. After twenty-five years only about a half of the library had been published, and that mostly in German. But this situation has been changed by the intervention of UNESCO, which together with the Arab Republic of Egypt named an International Committee for the Nag Hammadi Codices in 1970 and entrusted it with publishing a facsimile edition of the whole library. Four of its members constitute a Technical Sub-Committee commissioned to prepare the edition. Assisted by members of the Coptic Gnostic Library Project of the Institute for Antiquity and Christianity, they have convened for a series of work sessions at the Coptic Museum in Cairo to assemble fragments, determine page sequence, and supervise photography. *The Facsimile Edition of the Nag Hammadi Codices* began publication in the spring of 1972 at the firm E. J. Brill, Leiden, The Netherlands. Two volumes containing Codex VI and Codex VII appeared in 1972; a third, containing Codices XI, XII and XIII, appeared in 1973; and several, beginning with Codex II, are scheduled for 1974. There will be a total of eleven volumes in the facsimile edition. Meanwhile a complete English edition entitled *The Coptic Gnostic Library* has also begun to appear, with *The Gospel of the Egyptians* as the first of some ten volumes. Thus the '70s give promise of being the decade of the Nag Hammadi Codices, just as the '50s and '60s were decades of the Dead Sea Scrolls.

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